Shubra Sastri ran fingers through her hair. Her muscles flexed as she plowed under the weight of all that black hair. She rubbed her scalp back and forth, feeling the skin shift over her skull. She felt something peculiar – a pimple sized bump. She picked at it, scratched it until it came off under her fingernail. *Bugs…*she thought, bringing her hand in front of her face, waiting for her eyes to focus in the pre-dawn light.

She didn't see anything under the fingernail. She reached back into her hair and tried to find another bump. Through the window, she saw the first light of morning bleed red into the dark dome of night sky.

Thirty minutes later, the courtyard outside the window was washed in pastel colors. Long shadows started their slow retreat into the trees and buildings of the dormitory cluster. Shubra hadn't found another bump. *Not bugs...* she concluded.

She turned away from the window and looked at the man in her bed. He was snoring softly, lying on his stomach, his face turned sideways on her pillow. Light through the window cast an oblong rectangle over the fine white skin of his upper thighs. Shubra stared at the rectangle of light until the sun rose higher and it moved to his buttocks. Then she had another thought – *Nice ass.*

She shook her head slowly, chasing the numbness away. She went to the bathroom where she splashed water in a coffee cup and drank it down. She filled the cup repeatedly drained it with a breathless series of gulps. She took one look at herself in the mirror, realized in a split second that she wasn't ready to deal with that yet, and stepped carefully back into the bedroom.

Her eyes went from the muscular form of the man on her bed, to the nightstand where a pile of joints lay cold in an ashtray, to the bottles of Stoli on the floor, and finally to the kit that contained the paraphernalia they had used to shoot up heroin last night. Shubra saw the needles and thought – *Aids….*

But no, this guy seemed clean. From Norway, actually. Hadn't he said he was some sort of royalty there? Not bragging about it, almost embarrassed. Like he had to have an excuse for being so rich.

Shubra's eyes fluttered involuntarily, and a blast of pain tore through her head. She sat back down on the windowsill and wrapped the curtain around her naked body. She shivered even though it was already growing hot outside.

The worst of the migraine finished fast leaving a dull ache behind Shubra's eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She worried that that Norwegian would wake up and

find her crying, think she was a case. But she just didn't have the energy to wipe the tears away.

She looked at the man's back. He was huge through the shoulders with a narrow waist and, again, a nice, firm ass. His legs were so long, the calves and feet hung off her bed even though he lay diagonally with his head as far up as it could go in the opposite corner. He was big, no doubt about it.

Shubra remembered undressing him last night, stoned and feeling sexy as she knelt before him to pull down his underwear. She fell on her haunches when his penis sprang free. Oh yes, he was a big boy all over the place. The head alone looked as big as a baby apple. And the shaft was as long as her forearm. He'd smiled sheepishly, almost apologizing for his size. "It is a family curse," he'd explained, "or a blessing. Depending on who you talk to."

Thinking about it the morning after, Shubra leaned more towards blessing. It had been a little awkward when, during foreplay, he'd put it in her face – talk about intimidating – but once the actual intercourse started, her orgasms came hard, and they came fast. It truly felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. Like her body was being burned into ash by a sacrificial fire. Then the ashes caught a gentle breeze and blew away.

Of course, that could have been the drugs.

Which brought her back to – *Aids*.

No, she concluded, *he's the future king of Norway. He wouldn't have aids….*

The sun continued to rise, and the early birds took to the courtyard. From the window, Shubra watched a few of her peers stroll lazily through motes of dusty, tree-filtered sunlight. They wore backpacks and munched on pastries, drank coffee from thermos and water from bottles. Two boys passing each other stopped for some conversation; ended it with laughter and a hearty pat on the back.

More tears leaked from the corners of Shubra's eyes. *Future king of Norway*…. The truth was she couldn't even remember his name. It was some fucked up Scandinavian thing ending in "udski". She rubbed the inside of her elbow where he'd inserted the needle. She knew absolutely nothing about him except that he happened to be at her favorite club last night and he was uncommonly handsome, rich, and well-hung.

Then another memory came to the forefront of her mind. When she had retrieved a condom from her purse and the Norwegian shook his head. "It has been tried before," he'd said, holding his enormous penis up for her to see for herself. Shubra struggled to

fit the condom over the head of his cock, wrestling with it like a child trying to fit a circle into a square hole. For his part, the Norwegian seem to enjoy the struggle until the rubber sprang away and slapped him in the chin. They laughed and laughed.

But she never did get that damned condom on the prick.

Shubra wiped her face with the curtain, and, after a few body racking sobs, she forced herself to stop crying. She would have to go to the University's free clinic again. Get tested. It was just so humiliating, sitting in the waiting room with the poor students. But she couldn't go to her family doctor. It would get back to her father.

Light flashed from the courtyard. She looked out the window, scanning for whatever caused the flair. It happened again, and Shubra whipped her head towards the source. She saw her father standing between two trees, holding a machete at his

side. *Impossible!* Her father was in Dallas, four hours away from Houston. It couldn't be him…. She leaned forward and saw that, in fact, it wasn't her father. This man was thinner and had more hair. He looked younger too, without the deep, dark character lines on his face that her father had. Otherwise, they could be twin brothers.

The stranger slowly lifted his head and looked right at Shubra. She clenched the curtain to her chest. She noticed that he wore an old-fashioned korta, the sleeves of which were stained brown, and the skirt was horribly shredded. He bared his teeth and aimed the gore-coated machete at Shubra. Sunlight caught the helm of the machete and Shubra was momentarily blinded by the flash.

Shubra flew to her feet. The curtain pulled away from her body and she stood naked at the window, rubbing her eyes. When she focused them again, the mysterious man was gone. She leaned out the window, frantically searching through the trees, but he wasn't there. She sank back to the windowsill and kept looking until she calmed down enough to figure it had been a drug-induced hallucination.

Guilty thoughts, that's all.

She closed the curtain, tied it at the bottom so no sunlight could get in, and sat with her hands between her knees. The Norwegian looked so peaceful lying on her bed. She studied his profile; the milky white complexion of his skin, the blond scruff on his jaw…. She remembered his eyes being ice blue. Impossibly blue. She had an urge to see those eyes again, to lose herself in the arctic pools.

Shubra lowered herself gently on top of the sleeping giant. His skin felt sticky in the morning heat as her breast pushed against his back. She wrapped an arm around his chest and rested her cheek on his shoulder. He opened his eyes slowly and Shubra saw

that they were indeed blue. Very blue, but also red and puffy from a long night of alcohol, drugs and sex. He smiled though, and that was enough to melt Shubra's heart. He rolled over and held her close. She burrowed her head into his massive chest. He smelled good; musty, earthy. He circled his hands over her back a few times and then started snoring again. Shubra smiled and sighed pure contentment. She had been prepared to give him sex, but this was all she really wanted; to feel safe in a man's arms.

She dozed off dreaming about lush green valleys, forests full of snowcapped pine trees, cold blue waters, and a royal castle perched upon a majestic Norwegian hill.

Shubra sat in the waiting room of the University's free clinic. It was crowded, as always, and most of the people there were shaggy looking and poor. Shubra had thought she was dressing down when she'd put on the denim blouse and stone-washed jeans before leaving her dorm, but a furtive scan of the room told her that even the sandals on her feet cost more than the entire wardrobes of the other people waiting.

Feeling out-of-place, Shubra tried not to make eye contact with anybody. She looked at the posters on the wall; public service announcements warning against smoking, drinking, and – there you go – promiscuous sex. Shubra folded her hands in her lap and waited.

It was deathly quiet in the room. Only the whisper of book pages being turned, an occasional cough, and the disruptive event of a name being called to see the doctor punctuated the interminable silence. Shubra closed her eyes. Time passed – hours, minutes, it was too hard to tell. She allowed herself to doze lightly, just alert enough to recognize her name when, or if, it ever got called.

As she drifted in and out of sleep, Shubra heard a faint, rhythmic *ping* noise. Like a metronome. Or water dripping on ceramic. At first it was soothing, and Shubra lost herself in the sound, but after a while it became irregular, the *ping* happening out of sequence. It became jarring. Shubra lifted her head and opened her puffy eyes to look for the source.

She thought it might have something to do with the air conditioning system. She checked the ceiling but didn't find any signs of water damage. She looked to see if there was a wall clock that might be off, but there wasn't. As she continued scanning the room, she noticed another young Indian lady sitting across from her, looking even more out of place than herself. This one was dressed like an Indian Princess! She wore a stunning silk Sari – white as cream with veins of gold sewn through the fabric – and her hair was done up in jewels and ivory. Her arms were heavy with bangles and her hands painted red with henna. *She's in an acting class*, Shubra thought, *in costume for some stupid festival.*

There, at the feet of the costumed girl, Shubra found the source of the nuisance sound. Blood dripped from under the girl's sari, hitting the charms on her ankle bracelet. It alternated from drops to heavy streams, causing the irregular pulse. Shubra noticed that the gorgeous sari was soaked through and thick with blood around the girl's lap. It stuck to her crotch and the insides of her thighs. A puddle of red engulfed her dainty bare feet. Shubra stood up and was about to scream when the student intern entered the room.

"Shubra Sastri?" a young man in a white smock asked, the door banging against the wall as he pushed it open.

Shubra gasped. She looked at the young man, then back to the costumed girl. For the first time, the girl had raised her head, so Shubra could see her face. She was beautiful. Her eyes were large and sorrowful, pleading with Shubra. She lifted a henna-red finger to her lips and motioned for Shubra to *be silent!*

Shubra ran to the young man, grabbed his arm, and pointed to where the costumed girl was sitting. "Help her!" she cried, "She's bleeding!"

But the costumed girl was no longer there. The seat was now occupied by a disaffected young man with a goatee and a Houston Cougars baseball cap. He arched an eyebrow at them then went back to reading ESPN the Magazine.

"Who's bleeding?" the attendant asked.

Shubra frantically searched the room, studying faces, getting quizzical looks in return.

"She was bleeding. There was blood all over the place…." Shubra muttered, hanging on the attendant's arm. The pressure of a migraine headache started building behind her eyes.

The attendant led Shubra into the back rooms, assuring her everything would be fine. Just fine.

"She's crazy," Biju told Rachel handing her the clipboard, "Or strung out on dope or something. Look! Look at my arm!" Biju rolled up the sleeve of his white coat and showed Rachel the marks the patient had made with her fingernails when she'd grabbed his arm. Rachel noticed the half-moon crescent bruises on the bicep, but they didn't disturb her half as much as the arm itself.

"My God Biju," Rachel held his arm up by the elbow and inspected it, "you're lucky she didn't snap the bone. Do you have any muscle at all on your body?"

Biju took his arm back. "I happen to have a runner's physique."

“You have a pencil’s physique.”

“I am pretty sharp,” Biju joked.

Rachel groaned as they came to the patient’s room. They started whispering now.

“So why did she come here? Most people don’t come to the free clinic because they are ‘feelin’ a little crazy today’.”

“She wants testing for STD’s,” Biju summed it up succinctly, “specifically AIDS. The ‘Morning After’ pill too. I asked if she was using drugs and she said ‘no’, rubbing her elbow the entire time.”

“Shit,” Rachel frowned, raising the clipboard to her face. “I hate when they lie….”

“What’s wrong?” Biju asked, noticing Rachel’s expression.

“I think I know this girl. Shubra Sastri. We went to the same church.”

“You want I should get a different resident?”

“No….” Rachel answered slowly. “No…. I guess not unless she asks for one.”

“Were you friends?”

“Quite the opposite. There is some sort of feud between our families, so I’ve never even really talked to her. I assume she hates me though; she always looked down her nose at me when we were growing up. What the hell is she doing at the free clinic anyway? Her family is loaded.”

“She probably doesn’t want anybody to know she’s a strung-out slut junky.”

“Biju!” Rachel snapped.

“Well, she surely didn’t come here for our fast and courteous service.”

“And nobody ever will as long as you’re around.” Rachel sighed. “I’ll give it a shot anyway. If she doesn’t want to deal with me, she’ll just have to wait for the next resident to come available.”

Rachel waited until Biju disappeared around the corner before grabbing the doorknob. She looked at the clipboard one last time and flashed a wicked grin. “Shubra Sastri,” she whispered, “my my my.”

Rachel squared her shoulders, straightened her back, and stepped into the room with authority. Growing up in the close-knit Indian community of Dallas, Shubra Sastri had always been the pretty one, the popular one, the rich one, the one who was going to lead a great life. But in the examination room of the free clinic, pretty, popular and rich didn't mean a whole lot. It was all about who wore the white coat here.

At first glance, Rachel assumed it was a different Shubra Sastri. The girl perched on the edge of the table, hunched over with her arms hugging her stomach, a mess of tangled hair obscuring her face, looked far too wretched to be the bitch-on-wheels Rachel remembered from home. But when the girl lifted her chin, Rachel recognized the unmistakable features of her schoolyard rival. Even without makeup and hair style, and with the stress of emotion lining her face and leaving her complexion spotty, Shubra Sastri was still a strikingly beautiful girl. She had the fine-boned features of a fashion model, sharp cheeks in an elegantly angular face tapering to a dainty chin. Hell, she even had the ridiculously perfect beauty mark hanging just above and to the right of her sensual lips. To Rachel, as well as most other women, Shubra Sastri had the type of beauty that made them shout – "Unfair!"

Shubra looked at Rachel with such anguish and fear in her large, almond shaped, black eyes that the young doctor felt unaccountably guilty – taking pleasure from another's suffering. Then again, maybe it was all just karma in action.

"Shubra Sastri?" Rachel asked, trying to make her voice sound deep and impersonal.

Shubra looked at Rachel, studying her, and then replied in a mousy voice, "Rachel?"

"Yes. I'm a resident here." Rachel retrieved a pen from her smock and clicked it open, putting the tip to the clipboard. "I understand you're having some tests done today?" Shubra didn't answer; she just continued staring at Rachel. "I, um, guess I should let you know that there are other residents if you're uncomfortable with me."

Shubra surprised Rachel by standing up and embracing her in a tight hug. "Whoa there," Rachel exclaimed, holding her arms out to the side, "This is…. I'm not…. I'm a resident here…." Rachel protested, until she felt Shubra's body tremble. Then she brought her arms around slowly to complete the hug.

"I'm scared Rachel," Shubra sobbed, resting her head against the larger girl's shoulder.

"There there," Rachel said, patting Shubra's back. The embrace lasted far too long for Rachel's comfort. She started thinking of ways to break the hug, but Shubra just kept sobbing, pressing her face into Rachel's smock. Rachel felt the damp of tears and snot soak all the way to her shoulder and decided that was enough.

“Okay,” Rachel said, putting her hands upon Shubra’s shoulders and gently pushing her way, “Let’s see if we can get you cleaned up a little.” Rachel sat Shubra on the examination table. She grabbed a handful of tissues and wiped Shubra’s eyes and cheeks, then held the wad under Shubra’s nose and told her to blow. The snot clear and watery. No signs of infection.

Rachel stood at the sink, washing her hands. “Well, your mucus is coming out clear anyway. That’s a good sign. Of course, it doesn’t mean much as far as STDs go, we’re still going to have to test for those. Have you experienced any painful discharge? When urinating? Shubra?”

Shubra wasn’t listening. Once again, she was wrapped up in herself, clutching her stomach and gazing at the floor. Her shoulders rose and fell with every breath.

Rachel sighed. She picked up the clipboard, drew a few circles on it, then set it down again. She stood next to Shubra and reached out a hand tentatively. She touched the back of Shubra’s neck, then slowly started pulling the thick tangle of hair away from the right side of her face until she could see her eyes. “Shubra, I can’t help you unless you tell me what’s wrong.”

“There was a girl in the waiting room.” Shubra said, reaching up to clutch Rachel’s hand. Rachel sat next to her on the table.

“Yes, I heard about that. You thought you saw something?”

“She was bleeding.”

“But there was nobody there.”

“She was there.”

“Shubra, you’re under a lot of stress right now….”

“When she looked at me, I didn’t recognize her at first, but now I know who she was.”

“Oh? Well then, we can call her and make sure she’s okay? Do you know her phone number?”

“It was me, Rachel. I was the bleeding girl.”

Rachel couldn’t take her eyes off the clock. It was closing in on five minutes until two in the morning. Earlier that evening, after a dinner of leftover chicken curry with sticky rice, Rachel had made herself a promise that she would study until two and then sleep.

Four minutes to go.

Rachel put the back of her hand to her mouth and stifled a yawn. She stretched, and her oversized t-shirt shifted, riding up her back, its tag scratching her neck. She reached behind her head and fingered the tag down. Then she rubbed the back of her

neck. Then she took the Scunci from her hair and let the shoulder-length mane of black frizz loose. She shook her head and ran fingers through her hair to get the stiffness out.

She looked at the clock: one-fifty-eight.

Fuck it. Rachel slammed the book shut and pushed away from the table. She yawned mightily and regained focus looking right at the refrigerator. Were there any snacks she could eat before going to bed? Nothing too fattening…. Cornflakes, but then she might as well wait for breakfast, which, since she had to be at the clinic by seven, was only four hours away.

Straight to bed then, she decided, standing up and turning on the water at the sink. Molly, her roommate, was already asleep so Rachel would wash in the kitchen to avoid making noise in the bathroom. She kept an extra toothbrush in a plastic basket by the sink just for this purpose. She dipped the head of the toothbrush in a box of baking soda and started scrubbing her teeth, tasting the acrid powder on her tongue.

Rachel remembered from childhood that the best way to tell if medicine worked was how bad it tasted. In the Jalal house, that philosophy applied to dental hygiene as well, which is why she still brushed with baking soda. Then, while dwelling on the past, Rachel's thoughts flew to Shubra Sastri and the bizarre reunion they'd had that day. Drug abuse, dangerous sexual activity, hallucinations…. Rachel tried to match those behaviors to the prissy bitch she'd known as a child. They just didn't fit. Bumping into Shubra at the free clinic, running blood tests for HIV, prescribing the morning after pill – it was all a far cry away from the life Rachel had imagined for her schoolyard nemesis.

Poor girl, Rachel thought, spitting into the sink. But then she remembered, towards the end of the visit, when Shubra had tried to give her a couple of hundred dollars, saying that's how much it would have cost if she'd gone to see a real doctor.

Of course, Rachel had become haughty after Shubra offered her the money, growing stiff and formal, telling Shubra that all payment must be made at the front desk. But now, at two in the morning while tapping excess from her toothbrush into the kitchen sink, looking forward to a cornflake breakfast, Rachel questioned her own judgment. She'd gotten insulted by the gesture, a reaction caused by the old feelings of

insecurity and resentment for the rich and beautiful Shubra Sastri. Nevertheless, two hundred dollars doesn't come easy to a struggling medical student. And Shubra certainly could not have meant it as an insult, not after all they had been through in the examination room. The poor girl just probably didn't know any better.

Again, calling her a poor girl. Rachel cupped her hands under the tap, slurped some water into her mouth and splashed the rest on her face. She rinsed as she used the bottom of her shirt to dry off then spat into the basin. *Shit, I'm the poor one.*

Rachel leaned against the counter facing the refrigerator. Perhaps she had been too hasty brushing her teeth. Cornflakes and milk would be fine right now.

A knock at the door made Rachel jump and her heart started racing. She held a hand to her throat and waited, mouth open, afraid to speak. Again, a loud knock followed by an accented voice calling – "Hallo?"

"Who is it?" Rachel demanded, stepping cautiously towards the door.

"Well, I," the voice stammered for a moment, uncertain. It was a man's voice. It did not sound hostile or otherwise treacherous. If anything, there was a nervous tone to it. "Uh…. I am…. That is, my name is Erik. Fodski. Erik Fodski."

Rachel searched her memory for the name. Nothing came to mind.

"You won't know me. I'm Shubra's friend," the voice explained.

Rachel released a deep breath and felt some of the tension leave her shoulders. She walked to the door but did not open it, choosing instead to peer through the peephole at Shubra's friend. Distorted by the fisheye lens, Erik Fodski looked huge, blonde and ridiculous standing the yellow light outside the door.

"What do you want?" Rachel asked, noticing the look of worry on his face. He kept glancing from the street to the door and back again.

"It's Shubra. She's very ill. She wanted me to come get you. She said you could help?"

"How did she know where I live?" Rachel asked. Through the peephole she saw Erik raise his hands in frustration.

"I don't know, I don't know," he replied.

"Where is she?"

“She’s in my car. On the street in my car. Please? Can you come help?”

Erik’s car was a midnight black Humvee, parked haphazardly on the street, high beam headlights burning holes in the grey façade of the apartment complex. Rachel padded down the walkway barefoot. The passenger’s side window was so high, Rachel had to crane her neck just to see it, but the tint job was such that it made no difference anyway. She would have to have X-ray vision to spot Shubra in that monster.

Erik shot ahead of Rachel and opened the door. Shubra was curled up in a ball, her knees tucked to her chest, laying in the passenger’s side with her head resting on the console that separated the seats. Her little black dress had ridden up and, with the door open, her backside was exposed to the night; the smooth, round balls of her buttock overflowing the skimpy pair of white panties she had on. That, and the bottom of her feet, toes curled and twitching, was all Rachel could see from her vantage point on the curb.

“Shubra,” Erik spoke cautiously, putting his hand on her upper thigh with a familiarity that made Rachel look away, “Honey, I brought Rachel. She’s going to help you.”

Shubra moaned, and her feet twitched faster. Erik reached into the cab to help her sit up. Her face was blanched practically white, her hair was a mess, and the little

black dress that would normally cause a rave on any dance floor looked like rags wrapped around a corpse. Rachel felt a chill run through her body, imagining the Humvie as a giant mausoleum for Shubra’s rotting body.

“Rachel,” Shubra croaked, reaching for her.

“Let’s get her inside,” Rachel said, directing Erik to get Shubra out of the car. Erik lifted her from the cab and carried her in his arms like a child, up the walkway into the apartment.

Rachel pointed to the sofa. Erik lay Shubra there and she sobbed once, wet and pitiful. Rachel knelt at Shubra’s side and inspected her in the bright apartment lights. There were milky streaks of vomit in her hair and the front of her sexy dress was soiled with chunks of some undigested food. The smell was not pleasant.

“Shit,” Rachel stood up, went to the kitchen, and returned with a bowl of warm water and two dishrags. She attended to Shubra, soaking one rag, wringing it, and then putting it on Shubra’s forehead. She used the other one to wipe away the bile – from Shubra’s hair, her chin, and her upper chest. Erik watched, standing against the wall, looking big, dumb and out-of-place.

Rachel sat on the edge of the sofa and moved Shubra's forearm, so she could look at her face. Her complexion was yellow ash, like a parchment from a museum. The skin around her eyes was dark and sunken in. She was obviously dehydrated, possibly in need of an IV.

"This is not good, Shubra," Rachel said. "I think we'd better get you to a hospital."

Shubra looked back at Rachel, her sunken, inverted teacup eyes coming alive with awareness. "I saw her again," she said.

Warning bells sounded in Rachel's head. If only Shubra was pregnant, about to give birth on the couch, Rachel would have felt a lot more comfortable. She had studied OB/GYN, she'd done well on that rotation, but she didn't have any experience with 'crazy'.

"Who?" she asked, buying time.

"The bleeding girl. The girl from the clinic," Shubra sat up on her elbows, got close enough so Rachel could smell her sour breath, "*Me!*"

"Okay," Rachel pushed her down gently, "we need to get you something to drink. Maybe you can eat something?" Shubra ignored the question and stared at the ceiling.

Rachel noticed Erik standing against the wall. "Do me a favor," she said, "there's a convenience store on campus. Next to the student union?"

"Yes."

"Go get us some Gatorade or Pedialyte."

"Pedialyte?"

"Gatorade. Powerade. Any sports drink."

Erik nodded and in two steps was out the door. After a moment, Rachel heard the Humvie roar to life, the crunch of its oversized tires backing into the street.

Rachel rested her chin in her hand and studied Shubra. She really did look like hell. A hospital wouldn't be out of order in this situation. But which kind? Medical or mental?

Suddenly, Shubra sprang to life, sitting up strait as a board. She grabbed Rachel with two vicelike hands, her eyes darting wildly around the room.

"Did you hear that?" Shubra gasped.

Rachel momentarily caught up in Shubra's terror, couldn't speak, couldn't even breathe, she just sat on the couch desperately trying to hear anything over the pounding of her frantic heart.

"What is it?" Rachel whispered.

"Her padswama."

A padswama. An anklet with bangles worn by fashionable Indian women. Rachel thought it would have to be a very loud padswama indeed for them to hear it inside her apartment.

Shubra collapsed back on the sofa and sighed. "I've been hearing it all night," she said. "Even at the club. The music was loud, but I could still hear that damned padswama, jangling through all the songs. Then, when we went out to the car for some…." Shubra turned her face away, "when we went to get some air, I saw her in the empty lot across the street. She was wearing the same white sari, and it was just soaked with blood around her waist. She looked like she wanted to tell me something, but...."

"But what?" Rachel prodded.

"I don't know. Somehow, I lost sight of her. I asked the…. My friend, he went over to the empty lot, but he didn't find anything."

"Hey, Shubra?" A light went on in Rachel's head, "Did you take that morning after pill today? Uh huh. And didn't I warn you that it'll make you nauseous? Oh, and didn't I also warn you not to drink any alcohol after taking that pill? Alcohol and God knows what else?"

Shubra pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and rubbed. She snorted, and a bubble of snot appeared on her nostril. Rachel used the dishrag to wipe it away.

"Okay, look," Rachel started, "I'm not your family, I'm not even a real doctor… hell, Shubra, I'm not even your friend. I don't care what you do or who you do it with. But." Rachel took Shubra's hands away from her face, so they could make eye contact. "It seems to me like you've got a problem with drinking. Maybe even drugs."

"No…." Shubra halfheartedly protested.

"Well, it is either that or you're going crazy," Rachel leaned back.

“I saw a man, too. A man that looked like my father, but from the old days, you know? He was watching me at the window this morning. I closed my eyes, and he disappeared.”

“And were you drunk this morning? Or high?”

Shubra turned her head for an answer.

“You need help, Shubra.” Rachel concluded. “Professional help.”

“That’s why I came to you,” Shubra said softly. Her eyes started watering again. Rachel grimaced.

“But I’m not even a doctor yet.”

“I know. You’re not even really my friend, are you?” Shubra pushed her face into the sofa cushion.

At first, Rachel felt guilty for having said that, then confused, then a little angry – Sure, they had grown up in the same community, but they weren’t friends. They had never been friends. And how in the hell does it come to pass that now, after so many years, Shubra Sastri winds up on her couch at, God, two-thirty in the morning throwing guilt around? Rachel got up and went to the kitchen with the bowl and dishrags, a black cloud over her head.

Erik knocked softly and cracked the door. Rachel nodded for him to come in. He was loaded down with half a dozen plastic bags full of pint-sized Gatorade bottles. “I didn’t know which flavor,” Erik whispered as he emptied the bags so as not to disturb Shubra, “so I bought them all.” Indeed, the bottles he set on the coffee table represented every color of the rainbow and plenty of weird, electric colors only very thirsty men would even consider drinking. There wasn’t an inch of tabletop left by the time he had finished.

“Thank you,” Rachel smiled. Tell the boy to get some Gatorade, the boy gets some Gatorade. Lovely.

Rachel picked up an orange bottle and sat next to Shubra. She put a hand on her shoulder. “Can you drink something?” Rachel asked.

Shubra sat up and took the bottle in two hands. She drank slowly at first, then tilted her head back to drain over half the bottle. “Take your time,” Rachel told her, “You got a shitload more to get through.” She indicated the coffee table loaded down with sport drink.

Shubra panicked. “I don’t have to drink all that?” she asked.

“Absolutely. Wasn’t it nice of Erik to buy out all the Gatorade in Southwest Texas? You might want to consider taking up a sport when you feel better.”

“Who?” Shubra looked confused.

Erik came over and knelt beside her. “Are you feeling better, honey?” He asked, stroking her hair.

Shubra shied away from him, like he was a stranger.

“Is there anything else I can get you?”

Shubra shook her head ‘no’ and took another drink, eyeing Erik suspiciously over the rim of the bottle. Rachel stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“I’d say this was a bad, very bad, reaction to the drugs and alcohol. You’re dehydrated right now, so you need to drink a lot of this crap. You should also try to eat something; mild curry, sombar, soup.” She gave Erik a glance, hoping he wouldn’t take this the wrong way, “And, when you get your head together, you may want to consider getting some real, professional help.”

Shubra just sat on the sofa, hiding behind her bottle. Erik stood up. He was a head and a half taller than Rachel. She watched him bite the tip of his thumb, a worried look on his face, and felt inexplicably sorry for the boy.

“Okay then,” Rachel started moving, “I guess there’s nothing more to be done here. Erik, why don’t you take Shubra back to her place?”

“No!” Shubra exclaimed. “I can’t go back there.”

Erik and Rachel exchanged looks. Erik shrugged. “Can she stay with you?” Rachel asked.

“Well, I am staying in a hotel with my family,” Erik said, then immediately corrected himself, “but they won’t mind. Sure. She can stay with us.” He held out his hand to help Shubra off the couch, but she turned into the cushion, burrowing in like a frightened animal. She looked at Rachel.

“No. I want to stay here. With you.”

“Okay….” Rachel’s mind raced. Did Shubra Sastri just ask to stay with her? Here? In her apartment? The girl was crazy! “The thing is, I have a roommate. I can’t just let people spend the night without asking her first.”

“I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Yes, but it’s her couch too.”

“Please? I’m so tired. I just need to sleep.”

Shubra’s eyelids fluttered then closed.

Rachel pursed her lips and watched Shubra start to breathe heavily, snoring slightly. She looked over at Erik with his blank expression and massive shoulders. He could easily carry her, Rachel thought, pick her up and take her away. *All I’d have to do is ask*.

“Go home Erik.” Rachel said with a sigh. “I’ll watch her tonight.”

Afternoon sunlight spilled through the cheap plastic Venetian blinds and landed on Shubra’s face. She grumbled and tried rolling away, but her arm was caught between the cushions of the couch. So, she moaned and sat up, rubbing her head, massaging her scalp beneath the great mass of tangled hair.

Shubra took in the apartment. The walls were plaster white, the carpet a sensible beige, the furniture second-hand and faded black. There were very few personal touches – a Van Gogh print hanging on the wall, knick knacks scattered on

the top shelf of a bookcase. The books were all thick, medical tomes. It was a clean room. Sterile. Safe.

Shubra swung her legs over the edge of the couch and rubbed her toes into the carpet. Coarse. She tasted the bile lining the inside of her mouth and felt nauseous. There was plenty of Gatorade gathered on the coffee table, the bottles glowing like odd jewels as the sun spilling through the blinds lit up the liquid inside. Shubra grabbed one and chugged, flushing her mouth with the flavored water. It settled hard in her stomach, reminding her she needed to pee.

She pushed herself up, wobbled around the table, and went to the hallway. The door at the end of the hall was opened, displaying the washroom. Shubra used the toilet, scanning the labels of the toiletries as she urinated. Soap, shampoo, lotion, toilet paper – everything generic. Unfortunate, Shubra thought, especially when wiping herself with the coarse toilet paper.

She washed her hands, carefully avoiding her reflection in the dusty tiled mirror, and, out of curiosity, opened the door connecting to the bedroom. The bedroom was cramped and messy, with discarded clothes overflowing from the dresser drawers; books and papers scattered about the floor. A few framed pictures lined the top of one of the dressers. Shubra stepped inside to look at the pictures and saw snapshots of Rachel with friends and family. Shubra even recognized the scenery from a picture that was taken in her church in Dallas.

Shubra cleared aside enough room on Rachel's bed to sit. Then she lay down amongst the clothes. Maybe it had been seeing the church in the picture, but for some reason, lying in Rachel's bed made Shubra think of home. Something about the way it smelled. Not clean, but not bad either. A little stale perhaps. Like old blankets from a guest closet. She snuggled into the mattress, pressing her face against one of Rachel's cotton t-shirts. She closed her eyes.

An hour later she was woken by the rumbling of her own stomach.

Aside from the sharp hunger, Shubra felt pretty good waking up this time. Her body was refreshed, and her head seemed clear. She stretched her arms out, yawned, and patted her flat stomach, trying to remember the last time she'd eaten anything.

Her hand came away feeling gritty and Shubra noticed that her little black dress was filthy – stained and frayed and smelling funky. Disgusted, Shubra stripped the dress off and held it to her nose. Vile! She wadded it up in one hand and dug through Rachel's dresser with the other.

She found a folded sweat suit set and shook it out. It was a little large, but at least it didn't smell like vomit. She tucked it under her arm and took it with her to the bathroom. She ran the water in the shower and waited in front of the mirror for it to get hot.

Hell. She looked just like hell. She tilted her chin from side to side, up and down, taking in the pallor, the splotches, the limp, stringy, flat-black hair. She undid her bra and let it fall away, then stepped out of her panties. The mirror was too small

to get the full body, but Shubra thought that was just as well. Nothing she'd seen thus far had made her feel good about herself. Even her breasts, which usually lifted her spirits when she looked at them, seemed to be flagging a little. Droopy.

Steam from the shower started fogging the mirror. Shubra adjusted the temperature to make it a tad cooler and stepped into the spray. She placed both hands against the tile, leaned forward and let warm water pour over the back of her neck. Five minutes of that and she started feeling human again. She picked up the soap from the dish and

held it to her nose. It was mauve colored and smelled slightly of medicine. It did not generate a good lather when she rubbed it over her face and torso, stomach and legs, but the bar did have a gritty texture that created a scouring sensation. Not exactly pleasant, but effective. Shubra turned back into the spray and washed the soap from her body.

She closed the pipe and stepped out of the shower a different person. She dried her hair with a guest towel then used it to swipe steam from the mirror. Her eyes were a little brighter, the color had returned to her cheeks, and the moisture in her black coal hair gave it a shine that made her look alive. Even her breast looked rounder, firmer. Shubra smiled at her reflection. *Welcome back.*

A hunger pang racked her body, and Shubra hugged her belly with one arm. She ran the hand over her ribs, feeling the bones under her breast, then down to the sensual curve of her hip. She had a good, fine body. It just needed some food.

Shubra dressed in Rachel's sweats and went to the kitchen. She found a note addressed to her sitting on the table –

Shubra,

There is cereal in the cupboard and yogurt in the icebox. I won't be back until late. If you leave before Molly gets there – which should be around 7:00– please lock the door behind you. Call me at the hospital if you need me – 713-555-2154

Rachel.

By the time Shubra finished reading the note, she had already taken the bottle of milk from the icebox and was drinking straight from the lip. She drank milk until she couldn't breathe, took a quick break, then drank some more. Finally, she set the bottle down on the table and read the note again. It seemed a little terse, but not like Rachel was royally pissed off or anything. *Call if you need me.* That was nice.

Shubra thought about leaving some money for Rachel, then remembered she didn't have her purse. It was in the Norwegian's monster truck. She picked up the phone to call his cell, then realized that she didn't have his number memorized. His number was, in fact, saved to her own cell phone. Which was conveniently located in her purse. Shit.

Shubra used her finger to hang up, then got a dial tone and called her own number. She looked at the clock as the phone rang in her ear. It was almost 7:00and Shubra didn't want to be there to greet Molly. The phone finished its eight rings. Two more and it would roll into voice mail. Shit shit shit.

“Hullo?” Erik answered, a hesitant waver to his voice, “Shubra?”

“Erik, come pick me up.” Shubra snapped.

“Where are you at, honey?”

“Exactly where you left me last night, *honey*.” Putting a little poison in it, letting him know she wasn’t happy about being abandoned.

“Oh. Okay. I’ll be there….”

“Now.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Shubra killed the connection and blew wind. She really wasn’t in the mood for Erik Fuckski tonight, but she needed her purse and a ride. She figured if she bitched it up and started a fight, he wouldn’t feel so bad about just dropping her off and calling it a night. She could sure use a night off.

The time was getting dangerously close to 7:00 so Shubra decided to leave rather than risk an awkward meeting with Molly. She left the house wearing Rachel’s oversized sweat suit. Outside, the heat caused the long sleeved, cotton shirt to stick and prickle her skin that was rapidly growing damp with sweat. She walked to the apartment gates and found a patch of green grass in which to sit and wait. She pulled her knees up to her chest and allowed a black mood to fill her head as sweat collected in her armpits, between her breasts, rolled down the small of her back where it got trapped between her waist and the annoying elastic band on the pants.

By the time Erik’s massive Hummer rounded the corner, Shubra was ready for a fight. She stood up and brushed dirt from her backside. Then she put her hands on her hips and waited for him to roll to a stop. She started walking to the passenger’s side before he could get out and give her a hug. Sensing something wrong, Erik judiciously kept his mouth shut as he came around the SUV to open the door for her. He offered his hand to help her up, but she shunned him, making the difficult climb into the cab all by herself. Erik made sure she was safe inside before closing the door.

He trotted back to the driver’s side and hopped in behind the wheel. He cast a hopeful glance towards Shubra, saw her sitting there with a foreboding scowl on her face, and turned his attention to firing the engine and shifting gears. He backed the vehicle out of the entrance gateway and started driving toward the dorms.

Erik suffered the silent treatment for a few kilometers then broke down. “Shubra,” he said, “honey… What’s the matter?”

Here we go, Shubra thought. Then she started talking.

“You did a pretty good disappearing act last night, Erik.”

“But Shubra, you – ”

“Oh, sure, you’re always there when it’s time to pass out little white pills, or shoot up, or get wasted. And you’re always ready for a good fuck. But when it comes to handling real problems – Poof! There you go! Into thin air.”

“Shubra I – ”

“I’m sorry you didn’t get your nightcap, but you know, I wasn’t feeling all that good. Or hadn’t you noticed?”

“I held your hair!”

“What?”

“When you were vomiting. I held your hair and wiped your mouth, Shubra. I was right there.”

“Oh hey, Erik, no shit. Thank you so much for holding my hair. And wiping my mouth, too. That must have been very hard on you, poor baby.”

“Shubra, I stayed with you until you told me to leave. You insisted on it. Remember?”

“I remember the look of relief on your face when you left me.”

“Now Shubra, that’s not right. You were sleeping when I left.”

“I was only pretending to sleep. To see if you would leave me. And you did.”

Erik looked out the side window before making a turn. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry, Shubra,” he said. “I thought that was what you wanted.”

“You don’t give a shit what I want. You just stuck around long enough until you figured there was no chance of getting me cleaned up enough for a quick fuck and then you left.”

“That’s so not right.”

“Was it those pills, Erik? Maybe you gave me too many, that’s what got me sick? Kinda backfired on you last night, didn’t it big guy?”

Erik just shook his head and stopped the Hummer in front of Shubra’s dorm. She didn’t even wait for him to come around and open her door. She clawed the handle and pushed the heavy door open with her dainty shoulder. As it swung out, Shubra put her feet on the running board, but when the door hit the end of its hinges, it bounced back. Shubra panicked when she saw the wall of a door closing in on her and she slipped off the running board, landing in a heap on the asphalt. The corner of the door clipped her head, causing her to cry out in pain.

Erik was by her side in a flash. He knelt and inspected her head, gently touching it for signs of damage, asking her repeatedly if it hurt.

Shocked, in pain, and still very hunger, Shubra looked into Erik’s blue eyes and reached for him. She grabbed hold and, with a pitiful sob, buried her face in his chest. Erik wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up. He closed the passenger’s door with a vicious kick, punishment for what it had done to his girlfriend, and carried Shubra to her dorm room.

“Are you sure you’re, okay?” Erik asked for the thousandth time. He was standing behind Shubra in the bathroom, helping part her hair so she could feel the bump.

“I’m fine,” Shubra reiterated for the thousandth and one time, “No blood, no foul.” She acted cavalier about it, but she was still very rattled. She couldn’t stop shaking.

Erik put hands upon Shubra’s shoulders and looked at her in the mirror. His hands were so large, it felt like she’d just been wrapped up in a blanket. Shubra leaned into him, and he enveloped her with his arms. In the mirror she saw his shaggy blond head towering over her dark, heart-shaped face. She tilted her head for a kiss.

Erik obliged, touching his lips against hers. They were still locked in the kiss when Shubra’s stomach rumbled loud enough to make Erik’s eyes snap open with surprise. Shubra broke away, feeling foolish, but Erik just cupped her belly and said, “Sounds like dinner time.”

Shubra tiptoed to kiss him on the cheek then left the bathroom. Erik followed, asking where she wanted to eat.

“I really don’t want to go anywhere,” Shubra said, kneeling before the mini–ice box she kept in her dorm. She opened it only to find about a half dozen bottles of beer and a pint of vodka in the freezer section.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Erik commented as he watched her twist the lid of a Shiner bottler, “on an empty stomach.”

Shubra drank off the neck anyway. Then she tried unsuccessfully to suppress the belch. “Excuse me!” she exclaimed.

“Let me go out and get something. What do you want?”

“Oh God,” Shubra stiff armed the top of the ice box to steady herself. Turns out the Norwegian knew a thing or two about beer and empty stomachs. “Anything. I’ll eat anything.”

“How about the Café at the Hilton? They serve good food.”

“Fine.”

“I’ll be back,” Erik stood at the door, looking at her with concern. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

Shubra, swaying slightly, nodded yes.

Erik came across the room, plucked the bottle from her hand, and led her to the bedroom where he lay her gently on the bed.

“You sleep until I get back,” he said draping a sheet over her. “It won’t be but a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Shubra demurred. Her eyes wanted to close as soon as her head hit the pillow.

“Erik,” she called as he was just leaving.

“Yes?” he replied.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Erik closed the door softly behind him.

The burnt orange rays of the dying sun, filtered through her curtains, cast the bedroom in calming shades of sienna. Outside, the quad was silent, the students

having long since quit for the day. Shubra lay under the sheet and thought about Erik. First, she had picked a fight with him. Then she had acted like a spaz getting out of the truck, which hadn’t ended well. And just now, between her stomach growling and

her burping, well, she certainly wasn't using conventional female wiles to win over the future King of Norway.

She wondered if he really would come back with food, or if he was halfway to Oslo by now. *Texas was okay, but the women there….*

She decided it didn't matter anyway. She felt at peace in the stillness of her fading bedroom, under the thin sheet that suddenly seemed much heavier. She toyed with the idea that she was starving to death. If Erik never returned with food, she would waste away on her bed. She would close her eyes and just never wake up. And with that oddly pleasant thought humming in her head, Shubra welcomed the black cloud of sleep descending upon her.